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ABSTRACT

The fictive account of a school board's problems with a new policy illustrates the need to involve all affected groups in the policy-making process. The "Sleepy Hollow Board of Education" early in the school year adopts a policy discontinuing social promotions of academically unqualified students. After a year of pressure and protest from teachers, parents, and students, the board is forced to rescind its policy. The cause of the board's failure lies not in the policy itself but in six mistakes made in the policy-formation process. First, the board acted too fast, adopting the policy at the same meeting at which it was proposed. Second, it made no administrative analysis of the policy and failed to gather input from teachers and administrators. Third, it supplied administrators with no detailed implementation plan. Fourth, it gave no opportunity for parent input and failed to create adequate public awareness. Fifth, the board provided no forum for public debate among the interested groups. Finally, it did not make a legal analysis of the proposed policy. (RW)

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UPDATING SCHOOL BOARD POLICIES

A Component of the EDUCATIONAL POLICIES SERVICE

Volume 12/Number 12/December 1981

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Check *how* policy is set—not just *what* it says

By David A. Splitt

Although policy making is generally the function of the school board, the board is not the only actor with an important role to play in policy formulation. The superintendent, administrators and teachers, parents, and students are all affected by board policy, and each group has its "place on the stage" during the enactment of policy.

One way to understand the importance of including everyone in policy making is to see what happens when a board acts without proper regard for the roles of non-policy makers in policy making.

The author tells a tale of policy made without that regard. He then analyzes what went wrong and suggests how the tale's tumultuous end might have been avoided.

This is the story of a school board that awoke too late to the understanding that it could not set policy alone. It is September when our drama begins. The Sleepy Hollow Board of Education has just convened its regular monthly meeting when board member Ralph Van Horn asks for the floor.

"This district's long-standing policy permitting social promotions is a disgrace," Van Horn says. "It is unconscionable that we allow students who fail academically to be promoted or to graduate."

"Hear, hear," other board members call when Van Horn ends his impassioned plea. The superintendent agrees that the practice of social promotion should be abandoned, and the audience applauds.

After an intense discussion in which no real opposition emerges, the board adopts this policy: *It is the policy of the Sleepy Hollow School District to promote only those students who satisfactorily complete all course requirements each year. The practice of social promotion is prohibited. Teachers shall not give passing grades to students who do not earn them.*

So far, so good—but then the superintendent tries to implement the hastily enacted policy. His first step—a memo directing principals to carry out the policy and inform all teachers and students about it—meets with a storm of protest. "We can't just change horses in midstream! Too many kids will fail," teachers warn. Board members who might have heeded that warning are deterred by a local newspaper editorial endorsing the board's "return to a get-tough, no-nonsense commitment to the three Rs and educational accountability."

The policy remains unreviewed and in effect throughout the school year. Neither board nor superintendent makes any attempt to anticipate the policy's impact, but by June its impact is all too clear. The failure rate is up 600 percent.

In the prior year, 12 elementary students had been held back because of poor grades; this year, 72 elementary students fail.

Students are not the only casualties of the policy. At one elementary school, several teachers openly oppose the fact that the policy was passed without a phase-in period. They pass all of their students, and promptly receive notification that their contracts will not be renewed. Several parents file a lawsuit.

The superintendent, reacting to parental and union pressure (as well as to his own reassessment of the situation), finally asks the board to relax its policy and pass the students. The local newspaper editorializes that the board's policy "just hadn't worked" and "ought to be reconsidered."

The board capitulates, and social promotions return to Sleepy Hollow.

What went wrong? Remember, everyone had agreed that a ban on social promotions was a good idea.

The problem lay not in the policy, but in the policy making.

The following analysis of the Sleepy Hollow board's misadventures points out the problems that arise when a board fails to get the advice of the school community before it adopts policy. Each comment is accompanied by a rule of thumb to help policy makers avoid problems:

• *Clearly, the board acted too fast.* Not even the board members had time to consider all of the potential consequences of their action. To ensure adequate time, never adopt policy at the same board meeting at which it is proposed. If your state has an administrative procedure law which applies, this safeguard is built in. If no public notice of rule making is required, you should include it in your board procedures.

• *There was no administrative analysis of the policy or of the problems which might arise in trying to implement the policy.* The superintendent, administration, and teachers were not involved. To ensure in-

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Out of Bounds

. . . An alert to calls for policy action from legislators, citizens, and other interest groups beyond school district bounds . . .

Academic freedom is the subject of a new policy from the Connecticut State Board of Education. The policy, adopted in September, received national attention as the first state level policy sanctioning the right of schools to teach a broad range of ideas without censorship by outside groups.

Upon recommending the policy to the board, Connecticut Education Commissioner Mark Shedd said that "the pursuit of equal and excellent educational programs is threatened by political or religious interest groups that would seek to impose upon the public schools the stamp of their particular opinions, doctrines, or viewpoints." That "stamp," Shedd said, usually takes the form of either censorship of materials or restrictions on teaching methods.

Neither should be acceptable to public schools, but there are no "simple resolutions" to balancing the educational rights and responsibilities of all community members, the commissioner said.

The policy the state board finally adopted urges local boards to adopt policies that provide for public review of school programs. "Reasoned discussion" should lead to tolerance of differences, said Shedd.

The state board's policy defines academic freedom as "the freedom to teach and to learn." It distinguishes between teaching and indoctrination, stating, "Schools should teach students how to think. To study an idea is not necessarily to endorse an idea." A copy of the policy can be obtained from NSBA's Policy Information Clearinghouse. Ask your superintendent to send in a SEARCH Certificate, or drop a line to NSBA at the address on page 4. Be sure to specify that it's the Connecticut State Board's policy you want. (EPS file reference: ACADEMIC FREEDOM, code IB) ■

Policy making

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volvement, require a written recommendation from the superintendent for each proposed policy. The superintendent's job is to inform the board of any practical problems which might arise in implementing the policy. The superintendent's advice on proposed policy should involve key administrators who will later have management responsibility for policy implementation. If the policy will have a direct impact on the classroom, principals, and teachers (or their representatives) should be asked for comments and suggestions.

• *The lack of a detailed implementation plan for school administrators was the final, fatal blow to the board's policy.* Each policy should be accompanied by a written implementation plan prepared by the school administration. Policies are just words on paper. Without a plan to carry them out, policies are meaningless. Planning for policy implementation should begin when the policy is first proposed, not after its adoption. This is one good way to anticipate problems and to determine a realistic timetable for policy implementation. One major school district that banned social promotions actually delayed full application of the policy for three years. During that time, students and parents were fully informed, standards for promotion were carefully established and related to curriculum, and special programs to assist failing students prepared.

• *There was insufficient public awareness of the policy and no opportunity for interested parents to become involved in the policy-making process.* Notice of proposed policies should be given to people who will be affected by them. Many school boards overlook a simple, effective way of gaining public input on policy making. Proposed policy should be published whenever possible, and comments solicited. Many local newspapers print minutes or summaries of school board meetings, including proposed policies—and an address where comments can be sent.

• *There was no forum for give-and-take among the various participants in the policy-making process.* The formal nature of the regular board meeting sacrificed participation to the pressure of the agenda. Recommendation: Have an open meeting to discuss and mark up pro-

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UPDATING SCHOOL BOARD POLICIES is provided automatically each month to every board member and to the central offices of school districts subscribing to the Educational Policies Service of the National School Boards Association's School District Management Services Department. Subscribers may request sample policies referred to in articles from the EPS Policy Information Clearinghouse at NSBA offices, 1055 Thomas Jefferson Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20007.

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Policy Sampler

. . . pacesetting policies from school boards nationwide . . .

Neither students nor staff may smoke in two Reston, Va., high schools—and parents are lining up to request transfers for their children to both schools. The no smoking policy, initially effective in one school only, was recently extended to a second school when school officials received overwhelming praise for their pilot project.

Job applicants learn of the policy at their first interview, when they are asked if they smoke. If they do, they are told of the smoking ban. There's no smoking in the teachers' lounge or the boiler room—at least none with the sanction of school officials.

Students participate in an awareness program. This includes a review of health lessons on what smoking does to the body. Four aides monitor halls and bathrooms, and send surreptitious smokers to a compulsory smoking education program. Repeat offenders, according to district policy, are suspended for five days and must have a conference with parents and school officials before readmittance to school.

The program, which costs about $30,000 per year, uses materials by the National Institutes of Health, the American Cancer Society, and the Easter Seal program. (EPS file references: SMOKING BY STUDENTS, code JFCG; SMOKING ON SCHOOL PREMISES BY STAFF MEMBERS, code GBK)

Gifted math students in Wichita, Kans., receive no special instruction; they simply take the normal math sequence at an accelerated rate. The acceleration policy, effective in one junior high school only in the 1979-80 school year, last year was extended to a second school. The program's success there has the Wichita school board considering further expansion to other district junior highs.

According to the policy, math-talented eighth graders take the Algebra I course formerly offered only to ninth graders.

"We removed a year of boredom for these students," says Math Coordinator Loren Minard, who notes that much of the normal eighth grade math instruction was a repeat of seventh grade math. The accelerated program allows math whizzes to complete the district's math sequence without taking two math courses in any one year, and allows gifted students time to pursue interests in other academic areas.

District officials agree that phasing in the program helped avoid problems. For instance, they were able to evaluate student response to mixing eighth and ninth graders in the same class. They found the mix beneficial, although eighth graders had worried about being accepted and ninth graders were initially threatened about "having their turf invaded by young upstarts."

"Selection of students is the key," one official says. The rigorous screening program includes teacher recommendations, test scores, grades in other academic areas, and student and parental approval. Not only math skills, but also social maturity is assessed. (EPS file reference: ACCELERATION, code IKEB)

The next time students complain about the district dress code, tell them they could live in Taiwan. There, a government-imposed policy on hair styles requires that boys not grow their hair longer than 1.1 inches and girls may not wear their hair more than a fraction of an inch below their earlobes. The policy, issued by the Ministry of Education, applies to junior and senior high school students.

The policy is causing a furor in Taiwan, but is actually a relaxation of regulations that require boys to have clean-shaven heads, and girls' hair to be above their earlobes, parted on one side and pinned down.

Protest over the rules erupted recently when they were relaxed to allow girls in a band to wear longer hair when touring the United States. The unprecedented move was based on the notion that Americans might think the regulation haircuts "bizarre." When the tour was completed, the media ascribed some of its success to the relaxed hair code and launched a campaign to make the code permanent. (EPS file reference: STUDENT DRESS CODE, code JFCA)

What weight should final exams have in determining a student's course grade? "Twenty percent," the Montgomery County, Md., school board recently ruled. The new policy, which revises an existing one that weighted exams at 8 to 12 percent, was passed by a split board after heated discussion.

Board member Blair G. Ewing, a former teacher, questioned whether the board had any business setting any policy on the subject. "For us to set a figure, in effect, casts doubt on the judgment of the teachers," he said.

Said another board member, also a former teacher: "The high percentage places the wrong emphasis on testing." Elizabeth W. Spencer believed testing should be used for "placement diagnosis, assessment of change, and prediction of success."

The board majority, however, agreed with yet another former teacher, now board member. Suzanne K. Peyser said the added weight signaled to students that testing was important. "Students will take their work more seriously if they know they are going to be tested on everything they have learned." (EPS file reference: FINAL EXAMINATIONS, code IKAA) ■

The Weathervane

. . . a monthly alert to trends and issues of interest to the policy-minded school board . . .

☐ **Insured against audit findings?** It's a "rather revolutionary idea," says one of the two people offering a new kind of insurance. The insurance would protect recipients of federal aid against having to repay Uncle Sam any sums that federal auditors disallow. Right now the audit insurance is available only to prime sponsors under the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act, but may soon be extended to Title I recipients and then to other grant programs.

Coverage would include losses from managerial oversight or mistakes, not fraud or criminal mistakes. Districts with good track records in the federal grant department would pay less for insurance than would districts where auditors previously had uncovered any cause for disallowing grant expenditures—such as poor recordkeeping, payments to ineligible students, salary payments to staff not directly involved in federal projects, and so on.

The insurance program, underwritten by the National Union Fire Insurance Company of Pittsburgh, is offered by the Washington, D.C., brokerage firm of Municipal Risk Managers.

☐ **With friends like this.** The first question asked of the new education secretary was why public schools are so mediocre. In responding to the *U.S. News & World Report* interviewer, Education Secretary Terrel H. Bell, far from defending public schools, came right to this unfriendly point: "Local school boards are mainly responsible," Bell said, adding: "When school superintendents around the country try to implement higher academic standards, they are frequently undercut by school boards that are afraid to back up tougher policies." The full interview appeared in the magazine's June 8, 1981, issue.

☐ **SAT scores stable.** The decline in SAT scores that began 13 years ago may well have ended, according to figures recently released by the College Board. This year, both verbal and math scores remained at the 1980 level—424 and 466 respectively. Since 1967, the national average in either or both portions of the exam has fallen.

Even with the stable scores, College Board officials caution that it is "too early to predict whether this signals the end of the score decline or simply an interruption in the trend." Whichever it is, schools get credit for "serious efforts" to improve schooling—and thus, test scores, the officials said. ■

Policy making

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posed policy. After a proposed policy has been suggested at a board meeting, the board should hold a meeting at which board members, the superintendent, key administrators, teachers, parents, and even students can present comments and help refine the language of the draft. Some school boards have special policy committees which hold public mark-up sessions on rules; others meet as a committee-of-the-whole. To keep such meetings orderly, have a limited agenda, put a time limit on speakers, and permit everyone to have his say before allowing debate among board members.

• *There is no legal analysis of the proposed policy.* Recommendation: Have your school attorney review each draft of proposed policy. The woods are full of lawsuits, as this case illustrates. Most can be avoided by practicing some preventive law before a policy is cast in concrete. [For a comprehensive discussion of the attorney's role, see *Updating School Board Policies*, September, 1981.]

If your reaction to some of these guidelines is, "That's going to draw out the policy-making process for a month or two," you have anticipated my final point. The adoption of policy, including amendments to existing rules, should be a deliberate process with plenty of time for discussion, management and legal analysis, and just plain old "second-guessing." It takes time for all of the necessary participants to fulfill their roles in the policy-making process. ■

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